

# Buddhism in china essay example

[Parts of the World](#), [Asia](#)



Buddhism is believed to have begun in East Asia, in the Himalayas region (Ch'en, 1). Though its origin was a tiny nation, it rapidly spread throughout Asia majorly due to Buddhist priests. These priests journeyed across Asia spreading the message of Buddhism (Zurcher, 21). It is believed that Buddhism was introduced in China by these priests. In the early days after its introduction, it was widely accepted by emperors and citizens alike. Though it later declined, its influence on the culture and life of the Chinese cannot be gainsaid. This influence is evident from the fact that other religions that later developed borrowed heavily from Buddhism (Ch'en, 3).

## **Introduction of Buddhism in China**

There is no precise account as to how Buddhism was introduced in China. There are as many accounts on to how it was introduced as the number of historical scholars. Additionally, there many traditions that also explain its original introduction (Zurcher, 19). One of the traditions holds that some Buddhist priests arrived in China between 221-208 BC. The then emperor was unreceptive to the teachings and had the priests incarcerated. It is believed that at night a sixteen feet Golden Man broke the prison and set them free (Zurcher, 20). Bewildered by the miracle, the emperor revered the man and allowed the priests to spread the teachings.

Another tradition hold that the Emperor Ming moved by a dream, sent envoys to retrieve some sacred texts in the Yuezhi region (Zurcher, 22). The envoys later returned with the texts and accompanied by foreign missionaries; Buddhist priests. The Emperor welcomed them and built for them a monastery at Luoyang and allowed them to spread Buddhist teachings (Maspero, 403).

The most accepted account holds that Buddhism was introduced in China during the Han dynasty. The account further holds that a monastery was built at Luoyang, the capital of the Han Empire. This temple is believed to have been well organized, equipped with translators, religious leaders, and missionaries (Zurcher, 29). Through activities at the temple, Buddhism was spread to other parts of China.

## **Reception of Buddhism in medieval China**

Buddhism was not readily received by the Chinese at its inception. At some point it was regarded as despising the authority of the Empire. Key factors that contributed to its unfavorable reception were its contradiction to Chinese traditions and its dislike by the ruling class. It contradicted Chinese traditions in the sense that it advocated for monasticism while the Chinese traditions favored active social life.

The state disliked Buddhism majorly because its teachings were a threat to the economy of the state. Additionally, monasteries made very little contribution to the economic well being of the state. The state being aware of the threat the spread of the religion posed, took effort to ensure that it did not spread. The state thus branded it as alien and barbaric, not suitable to be adopted as an alternative or addition to the Chinese culture (Bentley, 83). This was meant to dissuade the citizens from accepting its teachings.

The alien aspect however turned out to be one of its greatest advantages in expanding in the society. Being alien, it did not have established customs and practices in the Chinese Society. Accordingly, it could change to adopt or incorporate established Chinese traditions and practices. This would enable it to win over those that were practicing such practices. This versatility greatly

contributed to winning over converts, who later were used to spread the religion to fellow country folk.

For instance, Buddhist teachings encouraged meditation. One of the traditions in China, Daoism, also incorporated meditation in its culture. Buddhist priests were able to change their teachings to incorporate this ideals based on Daoism. Similarly, its reverence for morality was also shared by Confucianism. Again the teachings were crafted in a manner that appealed to adherents of Confucianism.

This versatility also meant that Buddhism could be changed to fit many ideals. It is due to this factor that Buddhism was fronted as an alternative to the existing cultures, specifically Daoism and Confucianism. Being a new religion, it not only provided an alternative to the established ones, but also allowed new converts or adherents to fashion it according to their preferred ideals.

Another advantage of being alien was that its teachings were in the Indian language and had to be translated. As with any translation, the original texts were translated to various versions. These translations were greatly influenced by the ideals and knowledge of the translator. This again meant that the teachings could be translated in the context of the contemporary societal ideals. This ultimately precipitated many translations and equally many new converts.

Another advantage of being alien is that it was spread by foreigners at the initial stage. The priests being foreigners had no fixed abode. They thus could travel to any part in China, stay there until Buddhism took root and then move to other areas. It is through such travelling that the teachings of

Buddhism were spread to all parts of China. Accordingly, this factor only contributed to the expansion of Buddhism in the Chinese society.

The alien origin of Buddhism also greatly influenced some emperors to adopt it as state religion. At every change of a dynasty, a corresponding change in cultural practices also ensued. Every new dynasty wanted nothing to do with the overthrown dynasty, and as such adopted new practices. Buddhism being an alien religion was adopted by several new dynasties in a bid to distinguish themselves from the old dynasties. For instance, the Yuan Dynasty made Buddhism an official state religion (Yu, 64) to distinguish themselves from their predecessors, the Song Dynasty.

The alien nature of Buddhism also had disadvantages that to some extent hampered its expansion. One of these disadvantages was the language barrier. Having been founded in India, the early Buddhist priests were Indian. It thus was arduous spreading the teachings in China due to the language barrier. The language barrier also made translation of the teachings quite difficult. These factors essentially meant that in as long as the language barrier existed, the spread of Buddhism would be curtailed. This disadvantage was however overcome with time.

Another disadvantage for being alien was that the natives at first were reluctant to abandon their customs in favor of Buddhism. At some point it was viewed as an erosion of established Chinese customs and practices. This precipitated strong views against its teachings, with the state and religious teachers dissuading its citizens from embracing it.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear from the foregoing that the alien nature of the Buddhism played a role in its expansion in the Chinese society. In some aspects it hampered the expansion; in others it facilitated the expansion. However, weighed as a whole, the alien aspect was more advantageous as it greatly contributed to the spread of Buddhism in the Chinese society.

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